
THE TOFU MODEL: USING TOFU TO TEACH INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

"Introduction to Judaism" is a college level introductory course, taught every fall semester, on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 1:00–2:15 pm (plus a 50 minute weekly discussion section), at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The average class size is around 130 students. There are two graduate teaching assistants, who are responsible for all of the grading and for leading weekly discussion sections. Students are graded on participation (in lecture and discussion sections), reading quizzes, two short paper assignments, a midterm, and a final. PowerPoint is used to display key details, though class is more discussion than lecture based. For example, a PowerPoint slide might prompt students to turn to a specific page in the reading and then ask only one or two discussion questions, which are intended to prompt a lengthy conversation about a primary or secondary source. A copy of the syllabus used for fall 2011 is included below.

In general, I employ a rather linear historical structure. However, I begin the course with two class sessions on modernity. This approach allows for students to enter the course on equal footing. For students who enter the course with no prior knowledge of Judaism, this allows them to preview and engage with Judaism in the modern world. For students who enter the course with prior knowledge of Judaism, this allows them to preview how I will present information with which they are already familiar. Further, I have found that the majority of my students are more interested in modernity, so this allows them to both see the relevance of how the ancient material informs the modern world and hopefully assures that they stay interested in the course throughout.

APPROACH TO TEACHING THE COURSE

Given the fact that I was trained in a Religious Studies department and that this course is taught at a secular, state university, I designed this course to be more theoretical. We continually confront head-on the issue that essentialism conceals: Judaism is not a singular, stable entity, so we cannot reduce it to a single essence.

For these reasons, the textbook employed in this class is Michael Satlow's *Creating Judaism* (2006). Satlow advocates an approach whereby normative claims (e.g., "We believe..." or "All Jews believe...") are avoided. He attempts to define Judaism by plotting in on three "maps": Israel (or self-identification), textual tradition, and religious practice (Satlow, 2006, 1-18). While I use Satlow's map metaphor, students do not always connect with this. Sometimes they quibble over a finer point; other times, the level of abstraction confounds them. In order to help them gain a firmer foothold, I use texts about food as a means to signpost. Thus, when we study the Hebrew Bible, we read Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy

14 (where the major categories of permissible and prohibited foods are set forth); when we learn about the Karaites, we learn how their interpretation of the biblical injunction not to boil a kid in its mother's milk (Exodus 23:19; 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:31; discussed on November 3 in the syllabus) drastically differed from that of the rabbis; and when we explore Jewish identity in America, we read about the historical connection between Jews and Chinese food (discussed on September 13). These signposts allow us to check-in on the evolution of Judaism at any given point. They thus serve as a map to Satlow's maps.

My signposts are also intended to reflect my agreement with Jonathan Z. Smith's assessment of teaching "Introduction to X" Religious Studies courses. As Smith notes:

If the purpose of an introductory course is to introduce students to college-level work, then a part of that task consists in introducing the students to the academy's ethos of disclosure. The problem is not one of difficulty; it is one of time. We need to decrease coverage in order to allow for frequent structured pauses in which our narrative becomes problematic. (1988: 737)

My signposts function as "structured pauses" and Satlow's maps help to introduce the "academy's ethos of disclosure."

However, my students are still often confused. Introductory courses in the Humanities are supposed to be easy, or so they think. They are not used to the level of abstraction that is required to question "Judaism" in an Introduction to Judaism course. It feels too foreign, especially to students who come from a Jewish background. (I would presume this to be a common problem for any course that enrolls significant number of heritage learners). And, while I do want my students to feel some disorientation, I do not want them to get vertigo. Thus, I cooked up the Tofu Model.

THE TOFU MODEL

Students seem to understand that the Second Temple period (ca. 515 BCE – 70 CE) was a time of confusion. Whether this is due to prior learning or watching *The Life of Brian* by Monty Python, they are willing to accept that what it meant to be a Jew and to practice Judaism was contested in this era. They even seem willing to apply this understanding to classical rabbinic period (70 – ca. 640 CE), when rabbinic Judaism begins to coalesce. However, when we arrive at the Geonic period (ca. 640 – 1050 CE), they are perplexed. It is during this time, spearheaded by the Geonim, that a form of Judaism that is much more familiar to those acquainted with modern Judaism appears. Yet, paradoxically for my students, this is also occurring under the influence of Islam. Turning to our signpost of food, I introduce the Tofu Model.

"Judaism is like tofu," I say. They look at me incredulously. But I push on, offering my model. I explain to them how tofu, made of pressed soy curds, has no intrinsic flavor. It absorbs the flavors of the ingredients with which it is cooked. But it does have a texture, soft or firm. "Judaism is like tofu," I now remind them. It too has no intrinsic flavor; there is no essential core of Judaism; it absorbs its surrounding flavors. These flavors are composed of both its literal surroundings, or environment, and its geopolitical and cultural surroundings, or historical conditions. However, it does have a texture; it is not a *tabula rasa*. This texture is Tradition, meaning the texts, rituals, etc. that a given community brings to the table (or the kitchen). This texture interacts with other cultural flavors to create the Judaism of a given time or place. I then display a mathematical (at least from a Humanities perspective!) formula:

$$\text{Environment} + \text{Historical Conditions} + \text{Tradition} = \text{Judaism}$$

We then explore how the Tofu Model accounts for the Judaism of the Geonic Period. I ask my students: why does Judaism develop in several ways similar to Islam? Together, we examine the historical

conditions and environment of the Geonim in Babylon (roughly modern Iraq) and see how they provide certain flavors. And yet, at the same time, there is still something that appears distinctly "Jewish" about Judaism. This abstraction can be made more concrete by examining the texture that the Geonim inherit. These texts, rituals, etc. develop, simmering in their surrounding flavors. Thus, the Geonim inherit a texture, but the surrounding flavors subtly – and sometimes not so subtly – affect that texture. Moving forward, students can analyze the texture that each community inherits and if, when, how, and why that texture changes. The Tofu Model allows for continuity without reductionism.

I have found that this equation and the Tofu Model in general, help students to better navigate Satlow's maps. Over time, they grasp how Judaism changes through time and space. Yet, they also understand how we can still speak of "Judaism" without either assuming normative claims or lying to ourselves. There is something that connects these disparate communities. Whether that is best explained by Satlow's maps or my Tofu Model, I leave that up to my students and my readers. I believe that both theories complement each other.

CONCLUSION

Standing in front of the classroom at the start of every semester, I am always nervous. I know what the coming weeks and months will bring. Yet, my students – who are probably nervous for other reasons – do not know what I am about to do to them. Instead of taking the easy road, and going through the major beliefs, practices, texts, and history of Judaism while ignoring the problem of ushering everything under one tent, I am about to open a Pandora's box by questioning essentialism. Sometimes I wonder if I should just keep my mouth shut. But I cannot. I believe firmly that we must question these assumptions, even if it makes our jobs that much more difficult.

Fortunately, I have found that tofu has helped. It is an accessible metaphor that seems to resonate with many students. They have tasted the food and perhaps even cooked with it (or at least watched someone cook with it on the Food Network). While odd at first, applying this concept to Judaism eventually seems to make sense to them. While they may soon forget who the Geonim were, they will probably remember that Judaism is like tofu.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Satlow, M.L. (2006). *Creating Judaism: history, tradition, practice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Smith, J.Z. (1988). "'Narratives into problems': The college introductory course and the study of religion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56/4: 727-739.

SYLLABUS: INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM

COURSE HOURS

Tuesday and Thursday 1:00-2:15 pm

PREREQUISITE(S)

This course assumes no prior knowledge of Hebrew and/or Judaism.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course surveys the major practices, beliefs, and traditions of Judaism. Throughout, we will ask: what is Judaism? In an attempt to answer this deceptively simple question, students will examine how Jewish communities across history have shaped their practices and beliefs within their own specific historical circumstances. Further, students will explore how Jewish self-identity, textual traditions, and religious practices combine to define "Judaism." Students will interact with primary sources, including (but not limited to) the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, and the Zohar.

COURSE GOALS

Through guided reading in the classroom and at home, students will learn how to read historical documents, in general. Students will further develop these analytical skills through several writing assignments, both in class and take home. Finally, students will understand the historical development and the literature of rabbinic Judaism.

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE

In both class and discussion sections, students are expected to arrive on time and should not engage in private conversations. While laptops are allowed in class and discussion sections, students should use their computers for taking notes and not for surfing the web, sending e-mails, etc. There is no reason for a student to be talking or sending texts on his/her cellular phone during class time. This is distracting to both professor and students. *Students whose behavior in class is disruptive can expect a significant reduction in their final grade.*

REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

(1) Regular class attendance of lectures and careful preparation of assigned texts are essential aspects of this course. Readings are to be completed for the class day upon which they appear on the syllabus. Please bring the assigned texts to both class and discussion section each week. In grading papers and tests, we will be particularly concerned that you are learning the material and concepts that are taught in class sessions. Prior learning of Jewish sources is not a substitute for doing the work required by this course.

(2) Attendance and participation in sections: 10%. Active involvement in discussion sections is highly important. Your teaching assistant will provide an additional syllabus with standards and guidelines.

(3) Regular Pop Quizzes: 10%. Throughout the semester, students should expect to receive occasional in-class pop quizzes. These short quizzes will assess students' knowledge of course readings. If a student is absent when a pop quiz is given, then his/her grade for that quiz will be a 0. At the end of the semester, the lowest quiz grade will be dropped, and the remaining grades will be averaged and will count towards 10% of each student's overall grade.

(a) Students have the opportunity to replace up to two (2) pop quizzes by attending a CJS lecture (information available online at: <http://jewishstudies.wisc.edu/lectures/>) and writing a one page response paper. Each response paper will replace one quiz grade. The structure of the response paper is as follows: one paragraph summarizing the content and thesis of the lecture and one paragraph of your own critical assessment of the lecture. Each paper must be

submitted to your teaching assistant within one week of the lecture. *Late papers will not be accepted.*

(4) Two papers: 15% each; 30% total. Two short papers, each not more than **three** typed, double-spaced pages, will be assigned during the semester. They are due at the beginning of class on **October 6** and **November 29**. No e-mail submissions will be accepted.

(5) Midterm: 20%. There will be one midterm, given in-class on **October 20**. It may address any of the readings and class discussions up to that point.

(6) Final Exam: 30%. The final exam, given on **December 20**, will be cumulative and will address issues covered in the readings and class discussions. *Students must take the final exam at the scheduled time.*

(7) You may sign up for honors credit, which can be a very productive way of exploring your own interests in relation to the topics of the course. If you do so, it is your responsibility to talk with the professor to arrange your honors work in the first two weeks of the semester.

****Students are expected to bring relevant texts in hard copy to every class****

HONOR CODE

Students are expected to follow the University of Wisconsin-Madison Academic Honor Code. If students have any questions about this policy, please speak with your teaching assistant or the instructor. More information on plagiarism can be found at:

http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/QPA_plagiarism.html

EXTENSION POLICY

Extensions on papers and exams **will not be granted**. For each 24-hour period that a paper is late, the student's grade will be reduced by one full letter grade.

REQUIRED BOOKS

- (1) Michael L. Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice* (Columbia University Press, 2006) (CJ)
- (2) Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Rabbinic Stories* (Paulist Press, 2002) (RS)
- (3) *The Jewish Study Bible* [Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds; Oxford University Press, 1999] (recommended) (HB)
- (4) Electronic Reserve: Learn@UW (R)

****All books are available for purchase at the University Bookstore****

CLASS SCHEDULE

Week 1 Tuesday	Introduction; Studying Religion and Defining Judaism Reading: CJ, "Introduction," 1-21
Week 1 Thursday	Contemporary Judaism: Overview

	Reading: <i>CJ</i> , "Promised Lands," 22-68
Week 2 Tuesday	Jewish Identity in the United States Reading: Jane Leavy, <i>Sandy Koufax: A Lefty's Legacy</i> , 167-194 (<i>R</i>); Tuchman and Levine, "'Safe Treyf': New York Jews and Chinese Food," 1-23 (<i>R</i>)
Week 2 Thursday	<u>Creating Judaism</u> Reading: <i>CJ</i> , "Creating Judaism," 69-95, Numbers 5:11-31 (<i>HB</i>)
Week 3 Tuesday	The Hebrew Bible: A Brief Survey Reading: Genesis 1-3, 17; Exodus 19-20; Leviticus 19; Deuteronomy 4-6, 34; Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1; Proverbs 8 (<i>HB</i>)
Week 3 Thursday	The Hebrew Bible: Purity and Dietary Laws Reading: Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14 (<i>HB</i>); Mary Douglas, "The Abominations of Leviticus," 42-58 (<i>R</i>); Marvin Harris, "The Abominable Pig," 67-79 (<i>R</i>) Paper One topics distributed
Week 4 Tuesday	The Second Temple Period Reading: <i>CJ</i> , "Between Athens and Jerusalem," 96-114; Community Rule (<i>R</i>)
Week 4 Thursday	NO CLASS: Rosh Hashanah
Week 5 Tuesday	<u>The Rabbis</u> Reading: <i>CJ</i> , "The Rabbis," 115-139
Week 5 Thursday	Text Workshop: Midrash Reading: <i>RS</i> , 186-189, 193-199; Warren Harvey, "The Pupil, the Harlot and the Fringe Benefits," 259-264 (<i>R</i>) ** Paper One due in class **
Week 6 Tuesday	Text Workshop: Talmud Reading: <i>RS</i> , 80-84, 114-118, 128-135
Week 6 Thursday	Rabbinic Concepts: God and Creation Reading: <i>CJ</i> , "Rabbinic Concepts," 140-163
Week 7 Tuesday	Rabbinic Concepts: Torah, Revelation, Israel, and Redemption Reading: <i>RS</i> , 104-113, 163-166, 169-175, 215-217, 229-248
Week 7 Thursday	MIDTERM (in class)
Week 8 Tuesday	Mitzvot: Overview and Kashrut Reading: <i>CJ</i> , "Mitzvot," 164-186; Reread Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14 (<i>HB</i>); "Jewish Dietary Laws" (<i>R</i>)
Week 8 Thursday	Mitzvot: Sacred Time and Prayer

Reading: Mishnah Shabbat 7 (R); Mishnah Pesachim 10 (R); Mishnah Sukkah 1-2 (R); Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1 (R); Mishnah Yoma 8:9 (R); Mishnah Berakhot (R)

- Week 9 Tuesday Mitzvot: Lifecycle
Reading: Ivan Marcus, "Bar Mitzvah, Bat Mitzvah, Confirmation," 82-123 (R); Selections (R)
- Week 9 Thursday Geonim
Reading: CJ, "The Rise of Reason," 187-208
- Week 10 Tuesday Maimonides
Reading: CJ, "From Moses to Moses," 209-228; Selections from Maimonides (R)
- Week 10 Thursday Mysticism
Reading: CJ, "Seeing God," 229-249; Selections from Zohar (R)
Paper Two topics distributed
- Week 11 Tuesday The Dawn of Modernity
Reading: CJ, "East and West," 250-287
- Week 11 Thursday The Rise of Jewish Denominationalism
Reading: Reform Responsum on Cosmetic surgery (R);
Conservative Responsum on the Status of Transsexuals (R);
Orthodox Responsum on Cloning People (R)
- Week 12 Tuesday **NO CLASS:** Society of Biblical Literature conference
- Week 12 Thursday **NO CLASS:** Thanksgiving
- Week 13 Tuesday Jewish Denominationalism: Women and Gender
Reading: Stuart Charmé, "The Political Transformation of Gender Traditions at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, 5-34 (R)
**** Paper Two Due In Class ****
- Week 13 Thursday Jewish Denominationalism: Kashrut, "Outreach," etc.
Reading: David Kraemer, "'Bugs in the System' (The Kashrut Wars)," 147-172 (R)
- Week 14 Tuesday The Holocaust
Reading: Saul Friedländer, "The Holocaust," 412-444 (R)
- Week 14 Thursday Israel
Reading: *The Jewish Political Tradition*, 295-309, 424-440, 501-509 (R)
- Week 15 Tuesday Jews and UW-Madison
Reading: Jonathan Pollack, "Jewish Problems: Eastern and

Western Jewish Identities in Conflict At the University of Wisconsin, 1919-1941,"
161-180 (*R*)

Week 15 Thursday

Conclusions and Review

Reading: *CJ*, "Whither Judaism?," 287-296

Week 16 Tuesday

FINAL EXAM

2:45 PM – 4:45 PM